

FROM PASTOR
NIELSEN
APRIL
2011



Dear Friends in Christ,

This past month I have been deeply affected by the news of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Having lived two years in western Japan in the 1980s, I still feel a personal connection to the people of Japan. I have never been to the area north of Tokyo that was affected by this disaster, but I can imagine how this disaster has shaken and troubled all the people of Japan. That kind of devastation leaves people feeling very vulnerable. It makes me realize that the only thing I know about my future is that one day I will die.

In fact, the whole past ten years have been full of reminders that life is uncertain. September 11, the Deshler tornadoes in 2003, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, Katrina in 2005, major earthquakes, and now the disaster at Sendai, Japan. Conflict continues in the Middle East and in Afghanistan. Then there is also the fragility of our own economy with increasing debt, continuing unemployment, and now rising prices.

The news can be pretty depressing. In fact, it seems good for our mental health to avoid the news. People who don't pay attention to the news seem to suffer less anxiety and depression. Parents try to shelter their children from the news.

However, I doubt it is healthy for people to grow up thinking that they can take life for granted. If we take life for granted and forget how precious each day of life is, then how can we experience gratitude? And without gratitude for each day that we are given, can we really experience compassion and live life for all it is worth? Maybe a little dose of news is good for our children and for all of us.

Up until recent generations it was harder for people to take life for granted. Death was a reality that could not be ignored. Almost every family knew what it was like to lose at least one loved one at an early age. Without antibiotics even a little infection could become a life-threatening condition. Epidemics were a real danger.

Benefitting from the resources of modern medicine and from the prosperity and security of modern American life, we face the danger of taking life for granted. We can easily forget about our vulnerability and the threat of death. We can look at life as if tomorrow is pretty much guaranteed. And so we tend to get wrapped up in things that in the long run really don't matter. We waste our days because we don't appreciate their value. Our world becomes more secular and materialistic because we think we are in control of tomorrow. We even imagine that we can hold off death until we are ready.

Then when tragedy hits or we are diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, we are shocked. We cry "Why me?" as if we were supposed to be immune to loss and death. 1 Peter 4:12 says, "Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ."

The Church observes the season of Lent as a kind of reality check. We remind ourselves of our vulnerability, our dependence upon God's grace and mercy, and the reality of death. Lent reminds us that material things, pleasures, and amusements do not last. Storms and death are part of our life in this world. Each day is a precious gift of grace. Lent calls us to focus on those things that are eternal. Lent calls us to find our anchor in the grace of God before it is too late.

Then comes Easter. Easter is the celebration of Christ's victory over death. It is only when we know the reality of death, that we can truly experience the joy of the Resurrection. This year, Easter will be a welcome promise in a world reeling from loss.

Yours in Christ, *Phil Nielsen*